

Truth, Other Religions, and Mysticism

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Question

Is it possible that God does not merely save followers of other previously valid religions besides Islam out of a divine amnesty, but for the truth that exists in previous religions, including those such as Native American religions, and others?

Response

Every true religion has been revealed by God through His messengers the prophets (upon whom be blessings and peace), so all religions were originally the truth. But how much of this original truth remains is irrelevant once they have been superseded by a subsequent revelation, since the very fact of their abrogation shows they are no longer acceptable to God or adequate for men. The position of Imam Ghazali cited in the Letter to ‘Abd al-Matin entails that followers of such faiths, if unreached by the new prophet or his message, will be saved by a general amnesty from Allah regardless of the amount of truth or falsity in them, as He has said,

“We do not punish until We send a Messenger” (Qur’an 17:15).

All salvation, for Muslims or others, is out of divine favor and amnesty, not because of works, even the work of having true faith, for faith is counted in Islam among one’s works, it being rigorously authenticated that the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said,

Shall I not inform you of the best of your works?—belief in God . . . (Bukhari, 3.188–89: 2518. S).

And he (Allah bless him and give him peace) also said:

“None your works shall enter any of you into paradise.” Someone said, “Not even you, O Messenger of Allah?” and he said, “Not even me, unless Allah conceals me beneath a mercy from Him.[1] But do what is right” (Muslim, 4.2169: 2816. S).

So not even by the truth of one’s religious convictions does anyone enter paradise, but rather only through Allah’s favor in accepting one’s faith of them, in which sense all who enter paradise are under the “divine amnesty” of Allah’s mercy.

The Nature of Religious Truth

In religion, “truth” is something that engages not only the mind or the body or the soul separately, but all of these together. Allah sent messengers to mankind, prophets such as Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (upon them be blessings and peace), first, to reaffirm the divine oneness (tawhid) that is the very soul of every true revelation; second, to give objective substance to decent people’s impulse to do good and avoid evil through positive laws defining these two things in relation to God and to man; and third, to purify people’s hearts by the grace (baraka) of following the messenger of the time. All three are truth. For the mind, truth consists in knowing of the oneness of God and the other eternal verities of faith; for the body, truth is doing what is right and shunning what is wrong; and for the soul, truth is the closeness to God that results from sincere application of the first two.

Because of Divine Providence for both the essential sameness and incidental differences of mankind, the first of these three aspects of truth, the oneness of God, has never differed in the original revelations at all; the second of them, the commands and prohibitions of each faith, if more variable than the other two, reveals a shared moral content among revealed religions that plainly outweighs their differences; and the third of them, the purity of hearts, has differed very little in kind from faith to faith. Because of the nature of God and man, of the absolute and liminary, of life and death, there is a natural “family resemblance” between all faiths—just as the earth’s languages, in their variety and succession, articulate an essential human nature similar enough to permit translations between most of their texts and utterances. The unity of faiths proceeds from the unity of God and the unity of man; their differences represent either Divine Providence for different peoples and times, or the altering of the message of God at the hands of men.

The Number of the Saved

In the historical succession of divine revelations, people in every land and time who accepted God’s message—the truth in its three aspects that constitutes religion—were saved, while those who rejected His message were lost, and those who were unable to do either because of being unreached by His message were also saved, for Allah does not punish until He sends a messenger. In Islam, nobody goes to hell on a technicality, a point perhaps not always as well appreciated by other world faiths. I remember learning in catechism the position of the Roman Catholic Church, Christianity’s largest and oldest representative, in the form of a question and answer:

Q: Are all obliged to belong to the Catholic Church to be saved?

A: All are obliged to belong to the Catholic Church in order to be saved (A Catechism of Christian Doctrine: Revised Edition of the Baltimore Catechism, No. 2. Paterson, New Jersey: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1941, 32).

For those unfamiliar with the terminology, the opposite of “saved” is “damned.” Compare this to the passage referred to earlier in our Letter to ‘Abd al-Matin from Imam Ghazali in which he says:

Indeed, I hold that most Christians of the present time, whether Europeans (al-Rum) or Central Asians (al-Turk), are included in the divine mercy, Allah Most High willing, meaning those in the far lands of Europe and Asia who have not been reached by the prophetic message. For they fall into three categories:

(1) One group who have never even heard the name of Muhammad (Allah bless him and give him peace) to begin with, so are excused.

(2) A second group have heard of his name, his character, and the inimitable miraculous signs of truth (mu‘jizat) that appeared at his hands; namely, those adjoining the domains of Islam, and who mix with them, these being the unbelievers who deny the revelation.

(3) And a third group between the two others, who have heard of the name of Muhammad (Allah bless him and give him peace), but not of his character and attributes. Rather, since childhood they have heard that “a lying imposter named Muhammad claimed to be a prophet”—just as our children have heard that a liar called al-Muqaffi‘ was raised up by Allah as a pretender to prophethood. Such people in my view fall into the same category as the first group above in respect to knowing the true attributes of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace), since even though they have heard his name, they have not heard of how he really was, so how should they respond? (“Faysal al-tafriqa,” Majmu‘a rasa’il al-Imam al-Ghazali, 3.96).

Amnesty is amnesty, and for Ghazali’s position—which because of the reasoning behind it plainly applies to other non-Christian faiths, and even atheists—the measure of divine truth that remains in a previous faith now superseded has little bearing on the ultimate salvation of its followers. In other words, whoever is without the means to believe shall attain unto the mercy of Allah no matter what they believe.

Works and Paradise

But if one’s entering paradise is through the pure mercy of Allah, one’s rank in paradise is nevertheless commensurate with one’s spiritual state and works, as is attested to by many prophetic hadiths and Qur’anic verses, such as

“Each shall have degrees befitting their own works” (Qur’an 6:132);

and

“Whoever does the slightest bit of good shall see it; And whoever does the slightest bit of evil shall see it” (Qur’an 99:7–8).

Although I have not seen the question dealt with by Islamic scholars, it is difficult to think of a reason why such verses in their generality should not apply to everyone who enters paradise, even non-Muslims who do so out of divine pardon for their ignorance.

But this does not entail that someone given amnesty for his ignorance of the true revelation of his time, no matter how virtuous he may be, can attain to the felicity of someone who believes in that revelation, even if he is remiss, for Allah says:

“Shall We deal with Muslims [lit. “those who submit”] as We do with criminals? How is it that you judge?” (Qur’an 68:35–36).

There are many hadiths of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) which clarify that believing in the message of Islam entails a mighty wage from Allah that is beyond description or comparison with any other work, or even all other works together. Tirmidhi, Ahmad, and others relate with a well-authenticated (hasan) chain of transmission from ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Amr ibn al-‘As that the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said,

Allah Mighty and Majestic shall bring forth a man of my Community in front of everyone on Judgement Day, and shall unroll ninety-nine great scrolls [recording his sins] against him, each extending as far as the eye can see. He shall then say to him: “Do you deny a single bit of this? Have My recording scribes wronged you?” and he shall say, “No my Lord.” He shall then say, “Do you have any excuse, or even one good deed?” and the man shall be dumbstruck, then say, “No my Lord.” To which He will reply, “To the contrary, you have done a single good deed in Our eyes, and this day you shall not be wronged.” Then a single scrap of parchment shall be presented in his favor on which shall be written “I testify there is no god but Allah, and that Muhammad is His slave and messenger.” He shall say, “Bring him forth,” and the man shall say, “My Lord, what is this scrap of parchment compared to all these immense volumes?” To which He shall say, “Truly, you shall not be wronged.” Then the huge scrolls shall be placed on one side of the balance, and be altogether outweighed by the single scrap, and nothing shall prove weightier than “In the Name of Allah, Most Merciful and Compassionate” (Ahmad, 2.213: 6994. H).

This momentous event shows the vast difference of the Testification of Faith from any other work, something attested to by many other hadiths, among them the rigorously authenticated words of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace)

Whoever testifies that there is no god but Allah alone without associate, and that Muhammad is His slave and messenger, and that Jesus is His slave and messenger, and His word which He cast unto Mary, and a spirit from Him, and that paradise is true, and hell is true: Allah shall enter him into paradise no matter what he has done (Bukhari, 4.201: 3435).

To understand the full import of this, one should note that in Islam, the highest rank of good deeds is reserved for that which Allah has made personally obligatory (wajib), which includes the category of refraining from every sin. In each of these hadiths, the Testification of Faith outweighs a lifetime of remissness in performing this personal obligation, the instances of which in the first hadith fill ninety-nine great scrolls, "each extending as far as the eye can see." This means that the Testification of Faith is weightier than an entire lifetime of the highest rank of good deeds, the obligatory, without such a Testification. Thus the highest possible works that anyone without the Testification of Faith could fill his life with, the most saintly of all of them, could not reach the rank of someone with the Testification of Faith, the believer, "no matter what he has done." So someone who knows and believes in Allah and His messenger (Allah bless him and give him peace) cannot be compared to someone who does not, no matter how great their works, a truth which Allah expresses with the words

"Say: Are those who know equal with those who do not know?" (Qur'an 39:9).

Clearly, as the thirteenth-century mystic Ibn 'Ata' Illah has said:

Those reprieved for committing a crime are not like the elect who are the concern of the Divine.

Mystics of Abrogated Faiths

What has just been said of the followers of different faiths is even more patent in their mystics. Despite the abrogation of their religions, we do not doubt the possibility of mystics of other faiths reaching a higher spiritual plane, for when the lower soul is negated and sublimated by spiritual disciplines, the powers of the higher soul seldom fail to appear, and it is not impossible that in such a condition it might behold Ultimate Reality, which is, after all, as real and objective as Detroit or anything else in the physical world.

But what a difference between the few hundred Jewish, Christian, or even American Indian mystics of the Western tradition who left any record of their experiences—men and women such as Catherine of Siena, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Francis of Assisi, Moses Cordovero, Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, John Tauler, Henry Suso, Jakob Böhme, Handsome Lake, Isaac Luria, Julian of Norwich, John of the Cross—and the literally thousands of Sufi masters of the Islamic tradition who founded the great mystical orders, had immense influence for centuries at all levels of society, produced an unparalleled and monumental body of mystic literature in poetry and prose, and left countless adepts in the beatitude of the Divine Presence, a living tradition that continues to this day. What other religion has ever seen a Mathnawi like Rumi's? There is a tremendous difference between a few outstanding spiritual personalities that appeared at times and places in the West, like occasional watering places scattered across a

hinterland, and the throngs of mystics of the Islamic milieu, on a sea of the Divine whose tides flooded regularly.

Not only in the numbers of contemplatives, but in the abidingness of their personal experiences, there is a great difference between the mystics of Islam, who proceeded from the light of true monotheism to a state of perpetual illumination, men such as Sahl al-Tustari, al-Ghawth Abu Madyan, Shams al-Tabrizi, Ibn ‘Arabi, Abul Hasan al-Shadhili, and others whose testimony is unambiguous, and those of other faiths, who through self-mortification caught momentary glimpses of the Godhead in “experiences” they then translated to others in spiritual depositions.

Finally, there is vast difference between someone who experiences the One and knows it as such at all levels of his being—body, mind, and soul—and someone who discerns the One through a miasma of priestly dogma. Where Ibn al-Farid saw “clearness without water, gentleness without breeze, light without fire, and soul without body,” Ignatius Loyola saw “the most Holy Trinity, as it were, in the likeness of a triple plectrum or of three spinet keys.” The former was freed from the shadows of his own finitude by the sun of pure Being, while the latter’s mystic insight remained indelibly colored by received doctrine. The distinction between form and content avails nothing here, and what should rather be said is that even an object of numinous knowledge can be refracted through the prism of a sufficiently insidious interpretation. “The color of the water,” as Junayd once said of those who know Allah, “is the color of its vessel.”

The veracity of the revelation that one follows is a necessary condition for genuine knowledge of the Divine. East is not farther from West than someone who returns from encountering Allah, lost forever to anyone or anything besides, is from someone who returns from a state of unitive vision to worship another human being. The two are not alike. For most mystics in a sense return, if profoundly changed, to where they began. The Sufis of Islam proceeded from unconditional monotheism to the One whom they found at every level of their being at the end of the path; whereas mystics of other faiths had to begin with a heroic struggle to rise above the historical accretions of their faiths—the man-worship of Christianity, the anthropomorphism of Judaism, the pantheon of Hinduism, the nature-worship of shamanism, or the atheism of Buddhism—that each had to return to, at least in principle and personal narrative, after their experiences.

Truth and Salvation

To answer the question of whether “God does not merely save followers of other previously valid religions besides Islam out of a divine amnesty, but for the truth that exists in previous religions,” Ghazali’s position entails separate consequences for each kind of “truth” distinguished above.

For the first type of truth, that of orthodox belief, we have seen that Ghazali's position entails that those unreached by the true message are saved no matter what they believe, so the amount of truth that remains in their religion is inconsequential before the divine amnesty. This is also clear from passages in Ghazali's *Maqсад al-asna* [The noblest aim] and other works which show he knows that Christians have confounded the nature of God and man, and ended up worshipping a man, Jesus, instead of God, and that this is shirk or "associating others with God," the most complete corruption of faith possible; yet he still says in the passage previously cited: "I hold that most Christians of the present time, whether Europeans (al-Rum) or Central Asians (al-Turk) are included in the divine mercy, Allah Most High willing, meaning those in the far lands of Europe and Asia who have not been reached by the prophetic message," the latter including those "who since childhood have [only] heard that a lying imposter name Muhammad claimed to be a prophet" (ibid. 3.96). For Allah only ladens each soul according to its capacity.

As for the salvational role of the second type of truth, the practice of good works, for those unreached by Islam, though we have not found anything explicit by Ghazali or others about it, one may infer from the above-quoted Qur'anic verses that Allah's justice for all those who do good entails a distinction above and beyond His divine amnesty for their ignorance of evil. That is, they shall benefit from what they know and follow of morality.

This would also seem to apply to the third type of truth, the "truth of being" of personal sanctity and purity of heart produced by following the message and example of one's prophet, typified by the experiences of the mystics, and described by the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) as "to worship Allah as though you see Him." Here too, though the excellences of Western mystics are not lost, they are not really comparable to the mysticism of traditional Islam, whether in sheer numbers of illuminates, in the proven and systematic training of the great orders that ensured and passed on their experience to future generations, in the abidingness and clarity of their experience of the Divine Beatitude, or in the way their minds construed this experience when they endeavored upon their return to make what they could of it comprehensible to others. The divine question "Are those who know equal with those who do not know?" (Qur'an 39:9) is even more telling in mysticism as than in the previous two types of truth.

Conclusion

To summarize, religious truth consists in faith, works, and sanctity for the very good reason that man is mind, body, and heart. As such, the "truth that exists in previous religions, including those such as Native American religions and others" may indeed play a role in their salvation: not "truth" in the sense of their religious faith, which when altered or misunderstood is irrelevant to the supreme amnesty mentioned in the Qur'an, but rather in the degree of their felicity once their salvation is granted through this amnesty. While according to the above-

mentioned hadiths such people can never reach the degree of the least of believers in the prophet of the time, their degrees in paradise on the general basis of the Qur'anic verses about good and evil we have cited may well be influenced by their own moral choices in this world to do good and avoid evil as understood from their own revelations, indeed as common to most religions and even most consciences, and followed by them in the measure of their sincerity. And Allah knows best.

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[1] Nawawi writes: “The ostensive purport of such hadiths attests to the position of Muslim orthodoxy that no one deserves reward or paradise for his acts of obedience. As for the word of Allah Most High “Enter paradise for that which you used to do” (Qur'an 7:43), and His saying, “That is paradise, which you have inherited for what you did before” (Qur'an 16:32), and similar verses that show that paradise is entered through of works, they do not contradict these hadiths, but rather the meaning of such verses is that entering paradise is by means of spiritual works, though the success to do the works, the guidance to have sincerity in them, and their being accepted of one are through the mercy and favor of Allah Most High. So while it is true that one does not enter paradise through mere works, it is also true that one enters it through works, that is, by reason of works, which are of the divine mercy” (Sharh Sahih Muslim, 17:160–61).